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UNCLAS SOFIA 000423

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN PARLIAMENT RATIFIES ANGLO-AMERICAN SCHOOL AGREEMENT

REF: (A) 04 SOFIA 1416, (B) SOFIA 376

1. After months of intensive lobbying by Embassy Sofia, the Parliament ratified with an overwhelming majority March 1 the U.S.-Bulgarian agreement defining the legal status of the Anglo-American School (AAS) in Sofia. With its status defined in law, AAS can now begin construction of a new campus in the suburbs of Sofia.

2. Ratification of the agreement, which was officially signed in July 2004 (ref A), confirms the school's status as a Bulgarian legal entity. Institutionally the school is separate from the Bulgarian educational system, operates under its own charter and has received substantial tax-free privileges.

3. While several foreign schools have been operating in Bulgaria without formal recognition from the Bulgarian Government, AAS is the first foreign school to be chartered in Bulgaria under an international agreement. Since recognition of AAS was viewed as a precedent, the agreement underwent more than two years of bureaucratic scrutiny. In the end, we were able to alleviate some officials' concerns of possible contravention of the Bulgarian Constitution. One of the concerns raised was the school's right to own land through its status as a Bulgarian legal entity, mirroring the recent debate about amending the Constitution to allow foreigners to own land (ref B).

4. Ratification of the agreement will also allow AAS to secure bank financing and begin construction of its new campus. We anticipate the new school will open 2006-2007 for grades preK-9, with plans for a full high school over time. Currently, AAS goes through grade 8.